



Donner Summit Historical Society

September, 2009 issue #13

Newsletter

Opening Celebration!!



Hundreds of people showed up August 15 in downtown Soda Springs to welcome the new Donner Summit Historical Society museum and visitors' center into the world. Visitors enjoyed hot dogs, photographs, and conversation, perused the extensive collection of historical photographs, and witnessed the presentation of the first Summit Pioneer Awards.

The awards were presented to Bill Klein, who pioneered Summit ski instruction and so helped popularize the sport; Johnny Ellis, who built the first rope tow on Donner Summit and so helped make skiing accessible; and Dennis Jones, who also helped develop Summit ski instruction.

Bill, Johnny's 91 year old widow Evelyn Ellis, and Dennis' niece, Starr Walton Hurley, shared memories of the Summit and accepted the awards in front of the many celebrants.

In this issue: The historical society proposes a museum 20 miles long, mysteries solved - some anyway, the Sierra Hump, and "Building a Family History Library."

Beginning Next Month: Sugar Bowl turns 70 this year: what was life like in 1939, the first chair lift in California, Sugar Bowl's first year, the Snowball Express, Bill Klein's story, Red's story, Peter Picard, the Silver Belt, masses of pictures (some never published before), lots of fun.

Norm Saylor, really at home in front of a microphone, was the M.C. He is the founding president of the historical society. He kept the crowd entertained with stories and a description of the beginning of the modern ski area on Donner Summit.



Next year, the actual Grand Opening will be held with presentations to three more Summit pioneers. That will be on Saturday, August 14, 2010. If you missed this year's you'll want to be even more sure to put the date in your calendar.

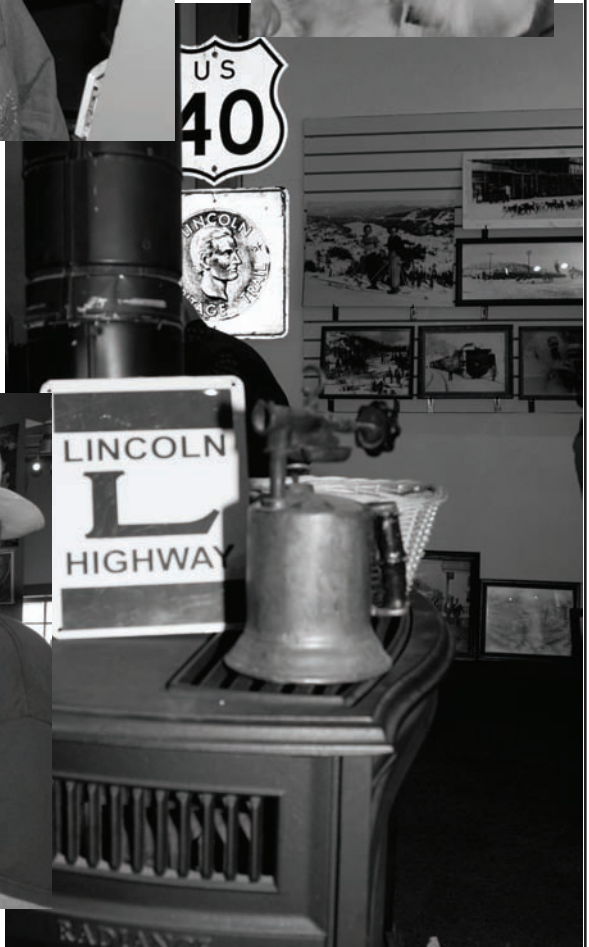
There were a number of important and/or well known people in attendance: Jennifer Montgomery, Placer County supervisor; John Olmsted, famous naturalist; Jack Duncan, author; Mark McLaughlin, author; Arthur Sommers, author; Hank Schwartz, who ran Northstar for many years; Jay Price, who ran Boreal for many years; Don Belden, was Sugar Bowl's mountain manager for years; and Pat Malberg, the Placer County district 5 western slope supervisor's representative.

A good time was had by all.

Take a look at Bill Klein's presentation on Youtube filmed by Mark McLaughlin.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtkqfV4m6Xw>





More Goals Than One

Part II

Last month we introduced our major goal number 1, a museum/community center for Donner Summit. If you didn't read it I highly recommend it. Failing that you can also go to the goals pages on our website.

In this issue we introduce major goal number 2, a museum twenty miles long.

Donner Summit is rich in scenery and history and although a museum will be nice, especially when it doubles as a community center, the best way to explore the Summit is to go out and explore.



We are going to create a 20 mile long museum along Old Highway 40 to better share the scenery, activities, and history of Donner Summit. Families will travel Old 40 from Cisco Grove to Donner Lake. All along the way there will be dozens of interpretive signs which will include history, stories, old photographs, nearby activities, GPS coordinates for geo-caching, local

supporting businesses, and a map of the entire route. A rough example showing Summit petroglyphs is below.

The Sugar Bowl sign will talk about the first chair lift in California and include pictures and stories. A sign at the Summit will direct hikers to Roller Pass and maybe the Judah Loop, which is two miles away, to see where the wagon trains crossed and talk about Summit history. A Van Norden Meadow sign will have viewers contemplate wagon trains resting after the arduous climb from the Nevada desert and the Native American grinding rocks.



A Soda Springs sign will talk about the oldest ski area, changes that enabled modern skiing, and bank robbers being captured in downtown Soda Springs. The Rainbow sign will mention Rainbow Tavern, the rope tow, and \$25,000 in gold coins still missing after a murder in the tavern.



The history has so many possibilities: petroglyphs, Chinese Wall, naming Mt. Judah, the first rope tow on Donner Summit, etc. The scenery likewise: Mt. Judah, Mt. Donner and the view to Donner Lake, the Pacific Crest Trail, wildflowers, hikes, etc.

Finally, our 20 mile long museum, along with a museum/visitors' center/community center, will be step one towards revitalizing the economy of Donner Summit.

We Answer Questions

History Detectivity is Fun

Do you ever find yourself looking for just the right word but cannot find it even though English has the largest vocabulary of any major language? What do you do when you can't find just the right word? Detectivity, the art of doing detection, sounds perfect for this story. Traditionalists might like a better title like: We Solve History Mysteries.

From time to time we get queries to our research department (info@donnersummithistoricalociety.org) which we try to answer accurately. Making up the answers is an option and can be more fun but we try not to do that. We have a reputation to protect. Here are some examples of problems we've been posed and our research methods.



First up was the picture to the right. This was sent, along with another picture, by someone who had bought copies in Truckee and wondered what they were. The picture, taken from Donner Ski Ranch shows the old Highway Maintenance building on Old 40 right at the top of the road just next to what is the ASI (Alpine Skills Institute and Sugar Bowl Academy) now. It was taken in 1945. We knew that one because, as you know from our last issue, that is our ultimate idea for a museum. We'd like to reconstruct a version of that. The shape allows lots of open space for exhibits and its background fits. After all, the museum should have an historical connection and transportation is the major historical theme for Donner Summit (first transcontinental highway, first transcontinental railroad, the Dutch Flat Donner Lake Wagon Road, and the wagon trains). Our museum would also function as a community center and have space for local businesses to serve tourists. As such it should help revitalize the Summit economy. So that was an easy one. We knew the answer.

Next up in the questions was John Svahn who works for the Truckee Donner Land Trust. He had a "quick question....I've been told and read a few times that the catfish tarn on the Summit, and some of the I-80 ponds that have bullhead catfish in them, were stocked as a food source for the Chinese railroad builders in the 1860's. Is that known to be true, and if so do you have a source I can quote? I'm basically looking to say 'toldya so' to a buddy, and hope I'm correct."



John made one grave error we'd not like to see repeated. He did not tell us what was riding on the "toldya so." One would think we'd get a "cut" of the "winnings" for supplying the answer. Nevertheless we turned the question over to our research staff who consulted "old timers." Old timers said that catfish were indeed brought up as described. For example, Maiden's Retreat, a small lake near Lake Angela (the Donner Summit Public Utility's water source on Donner Summit just north of Old 40 and east Donner Ski Ranch), has lots of smaller catfish which will come up and nibble at your feet if you step in barefoot. The size of the catfish in the various lakes increases with the decrease in elevation. The pond at Cisco is maybe the lowest you will find the catfish in question.



The poster on the previous page is of the proposed development in Serene Lakes (a larger version was in the last issue of our newsletter). The poster was on display and for sale at DSHS gatherings. The natural question about the poster was, when was that? Unfortunately people didn't and still don't date ordinary materials. Someone may want to save your ordinary items and later someone may want to know when it was made. Be considerate, date letters, postcards, and other publications. Digressions aside, people look at the poster and have various opinions depending on what they've heard or made up. Our research department though, believes in thorough research and empirical proof. The poster was examined with the proverbial fine tooth comb.

At the top of the poster there are illustrations of the various lodges along Old 40. One of note for this story is the Crest Garage and Lodge – see the detail picture upper right. It burned down in 1957. The poster cannot be after that date. The next detail is the key, to the right, which shows Sierra Lakes Club. Turning to the well known book about Donner Summit history by Margie Powell, Donner Summit a Brief History, we find out that Frank Allen incorporated the Sierra Lakes Club in 1957 (detailed picture of Margie's book, pg 97, which she was holding in the larger version of the picture is to the right just for the sake of veracity and our reputation). So the poster cannot be before 1957. So, date of publication: 1957.

HOME of the SIERRA LAKES CLUB
A Winter and Summer Wonderland for the Exclusive Use by the Members of the Sierra Lakes Club

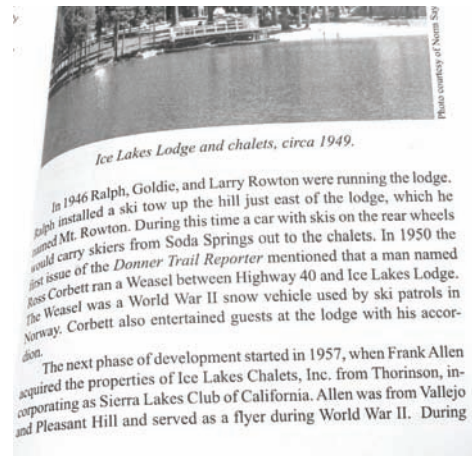
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1 Ice Lakes: Serena and Dulzura. Privately stocked with Trout and Catfish. 2 Main Lodge: Dining room, cocktail lounge, dormitories and scenic view veranda. *Private rooms, and dormitories for an additional 300 guests. 3 Cabins: Accommodations for 70 persons. Deluxe Chalet-type. Each with electric heating and fireplace. 4 Tent Cabins: California's most modern. 150 cabins for family out-door living. 5 Camping Area: In one of our most beautiful settings. Modern conveniences. 6 Cabin Sites: Available to members only, with greatest choice of locations, each site in forest setting. 8 *Ski Lift: Modern double chair lift-type. 9 Rope-tow: Ideal for beginners. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 10 *Golf Course: 9 hole. 11 Baseball Diamond 12 Horse-back Riding: through scenic trails 13 Swimming 14 Boating 15 Archery Range 16 Hiking on dozens of miles of scenic trails 17 Rifle Range
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* Proposed construction in the near future.

Then there is the picture of the bus just leaving Rainbow Bridge on the next page. Our pictures of Old 40 with cars are fairly easy to date because the American automobile industry, conveniently for future historians, changed styles annually. The bus industry did not do so. In this case though, dating the picture to before WWII is easy. The lane striping is solid. When WWII arrived, along with rationing and conservation for the war effort, the highway department changed to using dashed lines.

Finally, sometimes the answers don't work out. There is the interesting rock formation shown on the next page that looks like a chimney. It sits just a few yards north of Old 40 and east of Rainbow Lodge about a quarter mile. It is clearly a chimney - but whose and when?

Nearby is the small marker with the deeply incised "C" which you can see below left. Our research team could not imagine the function or origin of either one so we headed



The bus on Rainbow Bridge - note the solid line

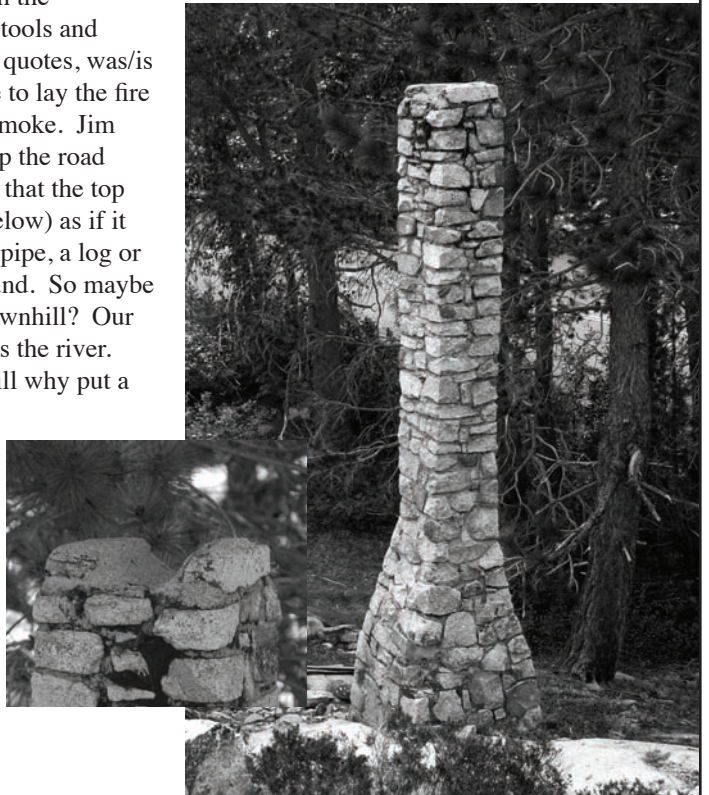
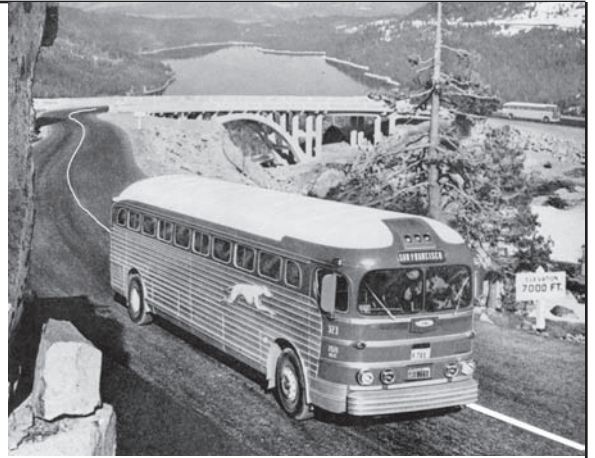
back for Rainbow to talk to long time local resident Jim Wiggins. Jim has lived in the neighborhood since the 1940's so surely he would know.

Jim looked at the pictures and then sat down and looked at the pictures. He had not seen the items in question and had no idea about their origin. Then he thought, well Crampton's Lodge was up there (under where the Rainbow overpass is now). The "C" fit that. Maybe that was where one of their cabins was? Our Summit history expert, Norm Saylor, discounted that saying it's too far away from where Crampton's was.

It was then when some creative thinking occurred. Let's look closely at the pictures. Our research staff combed them with the proverbial fine tooth comb. Careful research requires good tools and exacting attention. The "chimney," now we should put it in quotes, was/is missing important accoutrements of most chimneys: a place to lay the fire

and a place to exhaust the smoke. Jim Wiggins then took a walk up the road to check it out and reported that the top is grooved (see the detail below) as if it supported something like a pipe, a log or something else that was round. So maybe it supported water going downhill? Our staff looked downhill. That's the river. If you wanted to pump uphill why put a pipe on the pedestal? We have here a bone fide mystery. Perhaps our loyal readership can give us some help?

Of course all of this research is done by experts but you may feel free to try the techniques cited above at home without expert supervision. They are not normally dangerous although the historical society accepts no liability for improper usage.



And Another One for You



Finally, there is the Sierra Skiway sign found some twenty years ago on the forest floor by Shanna O'Hare and John Davis. They mentioned during one of the Society's public displays that they had the sign and did not know what it referred to. Our photography team immediately went into action to get a picture.

What was the Sierra Skiway? A quick search of the library (via the web) shows a reference to the Sierra Skiway. Page 66 of [Snowshoe Trails Tahoe](#) mentions the old signs and markers on Donner Summit, in the case of page 66, towards the Peter Grubb Hut.

More Detectivity

This concerns the picture to the right, the wheel in the tree. I would tell you that we saw the wheel in the tree, climbed the tree, used a magnifying glass to reveal the maker's markings, and then researched the maker's records to see to whom it was sold and when. Then we searched the records to find descendants of the installer and actually found the gravesite. It turned out there was some adultery and life insurance, a missing will and a gun that has disappeared along with \$25,000 in gold coins (that last part is another story that's true but you'll have to wait for that.) I could come up with a good story about all that or that we took the wheel to Antiques Roadshow but I'm concerned with the reputation for veracity of the historical society so I'll give you the less exciting - but true - story at least as I remember it's true.



Loyal readers will remember that we reported on Johnny Ellis, one of the pioneers of Donner Summit (and in fact one of the first three recipients of our Summit Pioneers Award on August 15 at our building's opening in Soda Springs). Johnny Ellis built the first rope tow on Donner Summit in 1936-37 at Lake Mary. In the last issue his was one of the Summit developments that did not happen. The material for that portion of the story came from Johnny's relatives and got to us just by chance as we wrote. Included in that were some pictures of the lower rope tow facilities.

Feeling energetic one day I went up to Lake Mary and hiked around looking for the ruins. No luck. I went all along the bottom of Mt. Donner/Judah and worked my way up fighting brush and wondering how anyone held on to a rope going up such a steep incline. Eventually I gave up when I arrived at the PCT (Pacific Crest Trail) just where it levels out after the switchbacks up from the Lake Mary Rd. I looked out on Summit Valley and Van Norden. I admired the wildflowers and the view, drank some water, and thought about heading down.

Then....

I turned around and faced uphill. There on a tree, in the middle of nothing, was an electrical box. Now I've gone up and down the PCT lots of times over the decades and never ever saw the box which was pretty obvious now. There was a wire. I followed it up the tree and it ended. Nothing more. Then taking a clue from good detectives, I looked harder and there, up the hill were very old boards and further up, the remains of Johnny Ellis' rope tow - the first on Donner Summit. There is just the wheel on the tree. Nearby there are other boards nailed up and spikes in trees. There's some cable and other detritus.

I kind of liked the story I was starting at the beginning here, but this true story was fun too.

Picture identifications pages 1-3

page 1: outside crowd numbering about 200 which was in addition to people who'd come earlier and left.

page 2: from top and clockwise: Evelyn Ellis (Johnny's 91 year old widow), her son, Norm Sayler (DSHS president), and Bill Klein (age 92); the mayor of Serene Lakes, Ralph Suter; John Olmsted (naturalist) and Marge Powell (DSHS founder and treasurer); Sharon Ruffner, bicyclists, David Africa (DSHS Board member) and Bob Ruffner, bicyclist; everyone finding something to look at.

page 3 clockwise from top: Norm Sayler's son, Lance, Ms Mercer and Lady Bug; Julie Pech and Anne Bowles; Lady Bug close up; a DSHS still life; Chistina Oldenburg, Sue Busby, and David Africa; Mark McLaughlin, artist, Analiese and Bill Klein; Don and Pat Malberg.

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Left Over from Last Month's Issue

The Sierra Hump

In last month's exciting issue we reported on Donner Summit developments that did not develop. In previous editions we reported on some of the people who had changed the Summit. That started our research department thinking. Were there ideas that did not get beyond the idea stages? We sifted through our archives and collected a few ideas. The Summit would have been a different place had they been completed not just for what they were but what they might have led to.

Having exceeded our allotted ten pages in the last issue by a couple of pages, two old ideas were left for this issue. One is a fascinating idea, "Plan realignment of the Sierra Hump." The Summit and Truckee would have been quite different had this idea been carried to fruition. This article too allows you to accumulate some good bits of trivia you can share and with which you can show off your erudition regarding obscure topics at cocktail parties.

The realignment to the "Sierra Hump" was presented in a talk to the Truckee Rotary and Lions Clubs in the winter of 1950. It came from articles in Fortune Magazine in December, 1944 and Western Construction News in November, 1945. The idea was to build a tunnel beginning outside of Roseville which would go to Verdi. Transcontinental trains would use the tunnel instead of the Judah route (the current route named for the man who laid it out). It was estimated that the idea would have (they didn't actually build it) saved Southern Pacific \$7.5 million dollars a year and would have paid off the investment in 27 years. This would be really great, the speaker (unidentified) said, because all the construction costs would be spent locally, "the greater construction costs is – and will be – at our front door."

The current route of the railroad, which is the busiest transcontinental route in the nation, has a 2.55% average grade and 33,000 degrees of curvature. That may mean a lot to the railroad buffs. In addition, helper engines were needed to get the trains over the Sierra, snowsheds needed maintenance, tracks needed clearing of snow, etc. All of that raised the cost of transportation. For example, track curvature was estimated to increase track maintenance costs by 300% over straight track, 200% for locomotives, and 100% for cars (that would be the railroad variety of cars.) Another way of looking at it, the route from Council Bluffs to San Francisco was/is 1830 miles. It cost the same for Southern Pacific to move trains along that track as it would cost S.P. to move trains over 2988 miles of straight track. Trip time using the new tunnel would be reduced from 4.25 hours (Roseville to Sparks) to 2 hours.

The speaker said that with California growing and doubling every twenty years railroad traffic could only increase and so the expense. Soon traffic would "exceed capacity."

The solution of the tunnel from Roseville to Verdi would solve many of the difficulties Southern Pacific operated under. The new tunnel would save 31,400 degrees of curve. The average grade would be reduced to 1.9% (Verdi is at a higher altitude than Roseville). The length of the track would drop from 138 miles to 108 miles.

Some more discerning readers might be thinking about some of the problems such as asphyxiation as traditional trains transited the new tunnels. The answer was "cheap and plentiful" power from the Army Corps of engineers' Central Valley Project. The trains would be electric. Electric engines saved money compared to steam engines too.

"If ever built, the new line over the "Sierra Hump" will be beneficial to its backers, beneficial to the railroad, beneficial to the general public and would be a great item in the defense program of the Pacific Coast. In this manner, the Southern Pacific Railroad which played so important a part in the founding of great Western Empire will again become an instrument of it [sic] future development and future perpetuation."

Unfortunately this speech was not a multimedia presentation so there are no pictures to share.

Imagine if the route had been built. It would certainly have affected the railroad community at the Summit much earlier than automation and other improvements did so the population would have dropped sooner. Truckee would have been greatly affected. People would have stopped riding the trains to snow activities sooner than they did. On the other hand, there would have been all that abandoned right of way, tunnels, and facilities. What might creative people have done with all that? Would S.P. have lost the lands granted to it by the Federal Government when they abandoned the route?

As I was writing this I remembered an old article run in another newsletter so I spent some time trying to find it. Twenty years of that other newsletter perused later, the article did not turn up. The gist was that in the age of engineering, the world in the late nineteenth century, a German nobleman had the bright idea of tunneling from Tahoe to the American River near the present day Cedars. He thought that all the water that would ever be needed in California could be transported through the tunnel.



Talking about things that were not built, here is another from a 1938 postcard. Herb and Lina owned the Norden Store and cabins.

"Do you remember this place? Well it is own [sic] and is the beginning of the 200 room Hotel Julius ask [sic] for about 3 years ago. Business is good and we expect a very good one in Winter. With best regards and Berg Frei.
Herbert and Lina Friedrich"

Building a Family History Library - A Resource for Genealogical Researchers and Others

One of our goals is to build a library of family histories related to Donner Summit. This resource will be made available to genealogical researchers and others interested in the family histories (ancestors and descendants) of people who have had or continue to have a connection with the summit.

Jim Hoelter, a DSHS board member and an amateur genealogical researcher, recently contributed photographs, an obituary, and a letter written by his great great grand uncle John Wesley Osborn Jr. describing the Osborn family's wagon trip west and over Donner Summit in 1849. Jim's great, great, great grandfather, John Wesley Osborn Sr. was 47 years old when he, his wife Susannah, and 6 of their 7 children made the journey. The Osborn material is reproduced on our web site at <http://www.donnersummithistoricalsociety.org/pages/osbornpage/osbornpage.html>, and Jim and his wife have an extensive amount of Osborn family genealogical research information in their Family Tree Maker software files.

If you have old family letters, newspaper articles, obituaries, photos, and other family history material that touches on Donner Summit, we encourage you to share the material with us and help us build our family history library. If the material is available in electronic form such as FTW (Family Tree Maker) or GEDCOM files, we would greatly appreciate having copies of those files.

If you are just beginning your family research and have questions about the process, please contact us. There are excellent genealogical resources available on the web and elsewhere.

Bold Graphics Nice Color for Your Wall



DONNER SUMMIT
Historical Society 2009

This is our first DSHS poster. We will produce annual posters which you will not want to miss out on collecting because only the finest houses will have these on display.

This poster comes in 24 X 36 (\$40), 12 X 18 (\$25), and postcard size (\$2). No home will be complete without one.

Simple send an email to info@donnersummithistoricalsoceity.org and we'll discuss details of acquisition since we don't have a formal store yet.

You can also place your order at the DSHS museum/visitors' center in person. The museum will be open weekends at least at this time of year.

Donner Summit Historical Society "Friend" contribution

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

phone: _____ email _____

I could help with:

fund raising _____ mailings _____ publicity _____ I have stories to pass on _____ I have pictures you can copy _____

I'd like to write newsletter articles _____ cataloging _____ grant writing _____ I could donate a computer _____
mail to: Donner Summit Historical Society P.O. 1 Norden, CA 95724

I'd like to be a supporter:

_____ \$25

_____ \$50

_____ \$100

_____ Other